



The Challenge of Accepting the 'Other': Jewish Attitudes Toward Converts

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Talmud Yevamot 47a-b

תנו רבנן גר שבא להתגייר בזמן הזה אומרים לו מה ראית שבאת להתגייר אי אתה יודע שישראל
בזמן הזה דוויים דחופים סחופים ומטורפין ויסורין באין עליהם אם אומר יודע אני ואיני כדאי
מקבלין אותו מיד

§ **The Sages taught** in a *baraita*: With regard to a potential **convert who comes to a court in order to convert, at the present time**, the judges of the court **say to him: What did you see that you to come to convert? Don't you know that the Jewish people at the present time are anguished, suppressed, despised, and harassed, and hardships are visited upon them? If he says: I know, and I am unworthy**, then the court **accepts him immediately**.

ומודיעין אותו מקצת מצות קלות ומקצת מצות חמורות ומודיעין אותו עון לקט שכחה ופאה ומעשר
עני ומודיעין אותו ענשן של מצות אומרים לו הוי יודע שעד שלא באת למדה זו אכלת חלב אי אתה
ענוש כרת חללת שבת אי אתה ענוש סקילה ועכשיו אכלת חלב ענוש כרת חללת שבת ענוש סקילה

And the judges of the court inform him of some of the lenient mitzvot and some of the stringent mitzvot, and they inform him of the sin of neglecting the mitzva to allow the poor to take gleanings, forgotten sheaves, and produce in the corner of one's field, and about the poor man's tithe. And they inform him of the punishment for transgressing the mitzvot: They say to him: Be aware that before you came to this status and converted, had you eaten forbidden fat, you would not be punished by karet, and had you profaned Shabbat, you would not be punished by stoning. But now, if you have eaten forbidden fat you are punished by karet, and if you have profaned Shabbat, you are punished by stoning.

וכשם שמודיעין אותו ענשן של מצות כך מודיעין אותו מתן שכרן אומרים לו הוי יודע שהעולם הבא
אינו עשוי אלא לצדיקים וישראל בזמן הזה אינם יכולים לקבל

And just as they inform him about the punishment for transgressing the mitzvot, so too, they inform him about the reward granted for fulfilling them. They say to him: Be aware that the World-to-Come is made only for the righteous, and be aware that the Jewish people, at the present time, are unable to receive their full reward in this world;

לא רוב טובה ולא רוב פורענות ואין מרבין עליו ואין מדקדקין עליו

They are **not** able to receive either **an abundance of good nor an abundance of calamities. And they do not overwhelm him with threats, and they are not exacting with him** about the details of the mitzvot.

קיבל מלין אותו מיד נשתיירו בו ציצין המעכבין את המילה חוזרים ומלין אותו שניה נתרפא מטבילין אותו מיד ושני ת"ח עומדים על גביו ומודיעין אותו מקצת מצות קלות ומקצת מצות חמורות טבל ועלה הרי הוא כישראל לכל דבריו

If **he accepts** upon himself all of these, then **they circumcise him immediately...** When **he is healed** from the circumcision, **they immerse him immediately, and two Torah scholars stand over him** at the time of his immersion **and inform him of some of the lenient mitzvot and some of the stringent mitzvot.** Once **he has immersed and emerged, he is like a born Jew in every sense.**

אמר מר גר שבא להתגייר אומרים לו מה ראית שבאת להתגייר ומודיעים אותו מקצת מצות קלות ומקצת מצות חמורות מ"ט דאי פריש נפרוש דא"ר חלבו קשים גרים לישראל כספחת דכתיב ישעיהו יד, א) ונלוה הגר עליהם ונספחו על בית יעקב

The Master said in the *baraita*: With regard to a potential **convert who comes to a court** in order to **convert**, the judges of the court **say to him: What did you see that motivated you to come to convert? And they inform him of some of the lenient mitzvot and some of the stringent mitzvot. What is the reason** to say this to him? It is so **that if he** is going to **withdraw** from the conversion process, **let him withdraw** already at this stage. **As Rabbi Helbo said: Converts are as harmful to the Jewish people as a scab [sappaḥat], as it is written: "And the convert shall join himself with them, and they shall cleave [venispeḥu] to the house of Jacob"** (Isaiah 14:1).

ומודיעים אותו עון לקט שכחה ופאה ומעשר עני: מ"ט א"ר חייא בר אבא א"ר יוחנן בן נח נהרג על פחות משה פרוטה ולא ניתן להשבון

The *baraita* continues: **And they inform him of the sin** of neglecting the mitzva to allow the poor to take **gleanings, forgotten sheaves, and produce in the corner** of one's field, **and about the poor man's tithe.** The Gemara asks: **What is the reason? Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba said** that **Rabbi Yoḥanan said:** Because **a gentile is executed even on account of stealing less than the value of a peruta, and an item that a gentile steals is not subject to being returned.**

ומודיעים אותו עון שכחה ופאה : ואין מרבים עליו ואין מדקדקים עליו: אמר רבי אלעזר מאי קראה דכתיב (רות א, יח) ותרא כי מתאמצת היא ללכת אתה ותחדל לדבר אליה

And they inform him of the sin of neglecting the mitzva to allow the poor to take **gleanings, forgotten sheaves, and produce in the corner** of one's field. **And they do not overwhelm him** with threats, **and they are not exacting with him** about the details of the mitzvot. **Rabbi Elazar said: What is the verse** from which this ruling is derived? **As it is written: "And when she saw that she was steadfastly minded to go with her, she left**

off speaking with her” (Ruth 1:18). [When Naomi set out to return to Eretz Yisrael, Ruth insisted on joining her. The Gemara understands this to mean that Ruth wished to convert. Naomi attempted to dissuade her, but Ruth persisted. The verse states that once Naomi saw Ruth’s resolve to convert, she desisted from her attempts to dissuade her. The Gemara infers from here that the same approach should be taken by a court in all cases of conversion.]

קיבל מלין אותו מיד: מ"ט שהו"י מצוה לא משהינן

The *baraita* continues: If **he accepts** upon himself all of these ramifications, then **they circumcise him immediately**. The Gemara asks: **What is the reason** to act immediately? It is that **we do not delay** the performance of a **mitzva**.

“Converts are as harmful to the Jewish people as a scab [*sappaḥat*]”

Tosafot, Yevamot 47b

1. Because converts are not expert in the commandments and Jews learn from them.
2. Because all of Israel are responsible for one another.
3. Because they mix together [in marriage], and the Shekhinah dwells only among families with pure descent.
4. Because Israel was greatly warned with respect to [oppression of] converts, and it is impossible to be sufficiently careful in this.

Tosafot, Qiddushin 70b-71a

1. Because they are not expert in the commandments and they bring troubles.
2. Because on account converts [= to attract converts] Israel is in exile.
3. R. Avraham the convert offers this interpretation: because converts are expert in the mitzvot, and more punctilious, reminding God (by comparison) of Israel’s sins.